

What makes for a great presentation — the kind that compels people's attention and calls them to action? TED talks have certainly set a benchmark in recent years: HBR even asked Chris Anderson, the group's founder, to offer lessons drawn from the three decades he's run TED's signature events in an article published last summer. But experience and intuition are one thing; data and analysis are another. What could one learn by watching the most successful TED talks in recent years (150 hours' worth), talking to many of the speakers, then running the findings by neuroscientists who study persuasion? I did just that, and here's what I learned:

**Use emotion.** Bryan Stevenson's TED talk, "We need to talk about an injustice", received the longest standing ovation in the event's history. A civil rights attorney who successfully argued and won the Supreme Court case *Miller v. Alabama*, which prohibits mandatory life sentences without parole for juveniles convicted of murder, this is a man who knows how to persuade people.

I divided the content of his talk into Aristotle's three areas of persuasion. Only 10 percent fell under "ethos" (establishing credibility for the speaker); 25 percent fell into the "logos" category (data, statistics) and a full 65 percent was categorized as "pathos" (emotion, storytelling). In his 18-minute talk, Stevenson told three stories to support his argument. The first was about his grandmother, and when I asked him why he started with it, his answer was simple: "Because everyone has a grandmother." The story was his way of making an immediate connection with the audience. Stories that trigger emotion are the ones that best inform, illuminate, inspire, and move people to action. Most everyday workplace conversations are heavy on data and light on stories, yet you need the latter to reinforce your argument. So start incorporating more anecdotes — from your own experience or those about other people, stories and brands (both successes and failures) — into your pitches and presentations.

**Be novel.** We all like to see and hear something new. One guideline that TED gives its speakers is to avoid "trotting out the usual shtick." In other words, deliver information that is unique, surprising, or unexpected—novel. In his 2009 TED presentation on the impact of malaria in African countries, Microsoft co-founder and philanthropist Bill Gates shocked his audience when he opened a jar of mosquitoes in the middle of his talk. "Malaria, of course, is transmitted by mosquitoes," he said. "I brought some here so you can experience this. I'll let these roam around the auditorium. There's no reason why only poor people should have the experience." He reassured his audience that the mosquitoes were not infected — but not until the stunt had grabbed their attention and drawn them into the conversation.

As neuroscientist Dr. A.K. Pradeep confirms, our brains can't ignore novelty. "They are trained to look for something brilliant and new, something that stands out." Pradeep should know. He's a pioneer in the area of neuromarketing, studying advertisements, packaging, and design for major brands launching new products. In the workplace your listener (boss, colleague, sales prospect) is asking him or herself one question: "Is this person teaching me something I don't know?" So introduce material that's unexpected, surprising or offers a new and novel solution to an old problem.

**Emphasize the visual.** Robert Ballard's 2008 TED talk on his discovery of the Titanic, two and a half miles beneath the surface of the Atlantic, contained 57 slides with no words. He showed pictures, images, and animation of life beneath the sea, without one word of text, and the audience loved it. Why did you deliver an entire presentation in pictures? "Because I'm storytelling; not lecturing," Ballard told me.

Research shows that most of us learn better when information is presented in pictures *and* text instead of text alone. When ideas are delivered verbally—without pictures—the listener retains about 10% of the content. Add a picture and retention soars to 65%.

For your next PowerPoint presentation, abandon the text blocks and bullet points in favor of more visually intriguing design elements. Show pictures, animations, and images that reinforce your theme. Help people remember your message.

# The TED commandments

The essence of a TED Talk is contained in *The TED Commandments*, guidelines given to folks who aim to speak at a TED conference:

1. Thou shalt not simply trot out thy usual shtick.
2. Thou shalt dream a great dream, or show forth a wondrous new thing, or share something thou hast never shared before.
3. Thou shalt reveal thy curiosity and thy passion.
4. Thou shalt tell a story.
5. Thou shalt freely comment on the utterances of other speakers for the sake of blessed connection and exquisite controversy.
6. Thou shalt not flaunt thine ego. Be thou vulnerable. Speak of thy failure as well as thy success.
7. Thou shalt not sell from the stage: neither thy company, thy goods, thy writings, nor thy desperate need for funding; lest thou be cast aside into outer darkness.
8. Thou shalt remember all the while: laughter is good.
9. Thou shalt not read thy speech.
10. Thou shalt not steal the time of them that follow thee.

The commandments concentrate on the verbal content of a talk – what the speaker says out loud – and make no reference to images. In fact ... A lot of the best TED Talks have no slides at all!

## TED Talk slide guidelines (note slides are NOT required)

When speakers **choose** to use slides, conference organizers have official advice on how to edit them:

- A single word or line of text can have more impact than a paragraph.
- Text-heavy slides distract listeners from processing what a speaker is saying.
- In general, choose images over text.
- Slides should be easy to understand.
- Keep graphs visually clear.
- No slide should support more than one point.
- Cut any slide that does not have a clear purpose.